

## Extra Feature Story

### **“To Kill a Mockingbird” Turns 50**

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Hailed as one of the most important books of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, "To Kill a Mockingbird" won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1961, was turned into an Oscar-winning movie and has sold more than 30 million copies. Now, on its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, fans are holding book readings, birthday parties and mock trials.

The story of racism and redemption set in the 1930s in rural Alabama struck a chord with a country reeling in the turbulence of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement.

Loosely based on author Harper Lee's personal experiences, the story is narrated by 6-year-old Jean Louise "Scout" Finch. Scout's father is Atticus Finch, a local lawyer, who defends Tom Robinson, a black man, who was falsely accused of raping a white woman.

Oprah Winfrey claimed, "It's our national novel." Former first lady Laura Bush stated, "It changed how people think."

#### **Once banned, now celebrated**

The issues of racial segregation, discrimination, violence, rape, incest and use of racial slurs caused an up roar in the early 1960s. The book was banned in several school districts throughout North America due to these topics until the 1990s.

Despite these challenges, "To Kill a Mockingbird" has been a standard in education for the last 50 years. Middle and high school teachers assign the text annually and close to one million copies are sold each year.

The National Endowment for the Arts has created a series of free material in honor of the novel's anniversary. These materials include a reader's guide, teacher's guide with lesson plans, essay topics and project ideas. There is also a podcast that includes an excerpt of the book and a discussion with retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor.

#### **Harper Lee only published one book**

"To Kill a Mockingbird" is the only book ever published by Harper Lee, who is now 84 and lives in her hometown of Monroeville, Alabama. She lives a very private life and stopped talking to the press in 1964.

Lee's most recent public appearance was in 2007, when she was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom by President George Bush.

In a 1964 radio interview, Lee commented, "Public encouragement, I hoped for a little but I got rather a whole lot, and in some ways this was just about as frightening as the quick, merciful death (of the book) I expected."

### **A literary symbol of the Civil Rights Movement**

"To Kill a Mockingbird" addresses issues of tolerance and justice. The Civil Rights Movement was well underway when Lee published her novel in 1960, yet the correlations are obvious. Released six years after the historic Brown v. Board of Education decision, which declared school segregation unconstitutional, and four years before Martin Luther King Jr. won the Nobel Peace Prize and the Civil Rights Act was passed, Lee's work challenged the status quo.

Fifty years later, the messages prevalent in the story are still critical to a constantly changing American society. As Lynn Neary of NPR discovered, ethnically diverse students are studying the book together in a 10<sup>th</sup> grade English class at T.C. Williams High School in Alexandria, Virginia.

Their instructor, Laurel Taylor, says that the story still resonates with all students, regardless of race or social status. "Trying to find your identity and realizing that your society doesn't always tell you the right thing" is a particularly profound message for teens, Taylor said. "Sometimes you have to go against what everyone else says to do the right thing. All that kind of resonates no matter where you come from."

--Compiled by Imani Cheers for NewsHour Extra